



# LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Kimberly A. Foster  
Executive Director

**COMMISSIONERS:**  
CAROL O. BIONDI  
PATRICIA CURRY  
ANN FRANZEN, VICE CHAIR  
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MARTHA TREVINO POWELL  
SANDRA RUDNICK  
STACEY SAVELLE, VICE CHAIR  
ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW, CHAIR  
DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS  
TRULA J. WORTHY-CLAYTON, VICE CHAIR

## APPROVED MINUTES

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The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **June 2, 2008**, in room 739 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

### COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Susan F. Friedman  
Dr. La-Doris McClaney  
Rev. Cecil L. Murray  
Steven M. Olivas  
Tina Pedersen  
Martha Trevino Powell  
Sandra Rudnick  
Stacey Savelle  
Adelina Sorkin  
Trula J. Worthy-Clayton  
Dr. Harriette F. Williams

### COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Carol O. Biondi  
Patricia Curry  
Ann Franzen  
Helen A. Kleinberg

### APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda for the June 2, 2008, meeting was unanimously approved.

### APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the May 19, 2008, meeting were unanimously approved.

## CHAIR'S REPORT

- At their July 7 meeting, Commissioners will serve as a focus group for the Department of Mental Health, providing feedback on the Mental Health Services Act's prevention and early intervention component. The focus-group process will be the only agenda item and Commissioners will be the sole participants, although the meeting is open to the public.
- Commissioners discussed a draft letter protesting the governor's proposed budget cuts to child welfare services, suggesting that it be sent directly to Sacramento rather than to the Board of Supervisors, which has already indicated its opposition to these cuts. (Whether the Board has officially taken a stance remained in question, however, and since the Commission cannot take a position contrary to the Board's, further research is necessary.) Commissioners made various punctuation and wording suggestions to the letter, but overall felt that its tenor should be stronger, perhaps stressing the long-term cost increases that will likely result from these proposed cuts.

Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton asked about the MacLaren Children's Center funds mentioned in the text as a possible alternate source of funding for foster children placed in community treatment facilities, whose reimbursements the governor's budget threatens. Department of Children and Family Services director Trish Ploehn explained that, following the closure of MacLaren in 2003, monies were set aside in the DCFS budget for several years to continue providing services to MacLaren-type children, since the facility was shuttered quickly and little transition planning was possible. Only about \$9 million of those funds remain, and they will not be replenished. Ms. Ploehn sees the MacLaren funds as the "resource of last resort," and advised against recommending that they (or any other specific source) make up the shortfall.

**Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton moved that the draft letter be approved in concept, with Commissioner Curry and executive director Kim Foster asked to alter and strengthen the language according to today's discussion and submit a completed letter for consideration and approval by the Commission's executive committee. Commissioner Rudnick seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.** Chair Sorkin thanked Commissioner Curry and Ms. Foster for their work on the draft.

- Because of budget considerations, the Career Development Intern position that was to have been added in the Commission office will stay instead at DCFS. Commissioners had been looking forward to participating in the program—which trains former foster youth to eventually become county employees—and believe a nexus exists between internships and youth input into the work of the Commission. Pursuing the CDI position was less about augmenting the Commission office workforce than about making a connection with youth who had experienced the child welfare system. Young people's attendance at Commission meetings can be problematic because of time and transportation conflicts with jobs and school, and because they are not compensated for their participation (although Commissioner Biondi generously donated her stipend to the two young men who last served as Commission youth representatives). Com-

missioners agreed that discussions about youth representation should continue and that the Commission should explore other ways for young people to participate, including a CDI intern when departmental finances allow.

- Chair Sorkin asked Ms. Foster to introduce the Commission's new secretary, Sharon DeFrank, who fills the full-time vacancy that has existed since last year. (A full-time clerical position is still unfilled, although student worker Leora Katz is in the office full-time when school is not in session.) Ms. DeFrank has worked at the Department of Health Services and the Department of Parks and Recreation, and most recently provided support at the deputy director level in the Department of Mental Health. Ms. DeFrank expressed happiness at her new position, saying that she looked forward to getting to know everyone.

### **DIRECTOR'S REPORT**

DCFS director Trish Ploehn updated Commissioners on a number of items.

- At this Wednesday's Celebration '08, 132 foster and probation youth will be honored as they graduate high school and prepare to go on to college or job programs. A packet distributed to Commissioners gave details for the event, and all are invited.
- After a nationwide selection process, Los Angeles County's application to participate in the Georgetown Collaborative has been accepted. This is a two-year certification program starting this July that will allow leaders from seven county entities—DCFS, Probation, the Department of Mental Health, the Public Defender, the Alternate Public Defender, the District Attorney's office, and the juvenile court—to travel to Washington, DC, to do work around service integration that will be implemented locally. The focus for the Los Angeles team, which will include Ms. Ploehn, Chief Probation Officer Robert Taylor, DMH director Marv Southard, Judge Michael Nash, and others, will be on fully integrating services for DCFS and Probation youth.
- No official changes have been announced to the governor's proposed 2008–2009 budget, which calls for \$25 million in cuts to child welfare services in Los Angeles County alone, although the Board of Supervisors, the Chief Executive Officer, and Assembly Speaker Karen Bass have been soliciting support across the state to decrease or eliminate those reductions. The state assembly has rejected the governor's cuts and if the state senate does also, as expected, the governor would need to address the state's \$17 billion shortfall in other ways. DCFS has put all new programs and contracts on hold until more is known, probably by this fall.
- Harvey Kawasaki, chief of DCFS's community-based support services division, updated Commissioners on the department's Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project, which was approved by the Board of Supervisors on February 26. In this 12-month project, \$5 million has been allocated to eight lead agencies (one in each of the county's service planning areas), all experienced with community service networks, that will work with DCFS regional offices on prevention strategies to expand those networks and increase the safety net in communities. Because funds are limited, agen-

cies are identifying specific ZIP Codes on which to concentrate, building connections there so that as families receive the comprehensive prevention services they need, fewer will come to the attention of the child welfare system. Services include not only those ‘hard’ services that are usually ordered by the court—counseling, parent education, conjoint therapy, and so on—but strategies that tackle issues of social isolation, economic well-being, and other root causes of child abuse and neglect.

As agency plans are finalized during the project’s first three months, an evaluation process is also being developed that will both incorporate best practices in preventing child abuse and encourage a collaboration of county entities extending beyond the project. Casey Family Programs, First 5 LA, DCFS, and Jacquelyn McCroskey of the Children and Families Research Consortium are leveraging funds and expertise to develop evaluation tools and processes that the county can use for this project and in the future. DCFS is working with the Interagency Operations Group and the Chief Executive Office’s Service Integration Branch to engage other county departments in planning and relationship-building with community-based organizations. The project’s funds are not meant to create new services—that wouldn’t be practicable without extensive sustainability plans—but to create opportunities for community networks, DCFS offices, and other county departments to work together and leverage what each brings to the table.

Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton asked about plans in SPA 8, which have prompted several rounds of public comment at recent Commission meetings. The primary prevention strategy in SPA 8, Mr. Kawasaki explained, is to expand the number of its neighborhood action councils—now numbering 25—and charge them to be part of a community dialogue about child abuse issues. Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton recommended broad communication of that goal within the community, which Mr. Kawasaki said would happen with the help of Casey Family Programs communications experts and their media consultants, Nakatomi Associates, once plans are finalized. Lead agencies will likely use their own media contacts to publicize their specific stories, and will also make use of the Internet.

Chair Sorkin remarked on the three months of planning and preparation, which leaves only nine months for project implementation. The Board of Supervisors will be asked to extend the project’s timeframe so that the implementation phase will have a full 12 months, Mr. Kawasaki said, but he also stressed that many agencies had evaluation instruments and prevention surveys already in use, and much work on the evaluation tools was completed prior to Board approval.

#### **CHILDHOOD OBESITY COMMITTEE REPORT**

The childhood obesity committee has met four times since obesity was identified as a health and wellness issue at the November 2007 Commission retreat; it continues to meet monthly. Commissioner Pedersen and Chair Sorkin are co-chairs, and participants have included Vice Chairs Worthy-Clayton and Franzen, plus Commissioners Kleinberg and Rudnick. Representatives from DCFS have also attended—Chair Sorkin particularly

thanked Susan Jakubowski for her help—as have staff from the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Association of Community Human Services Agencies, and other guests.

- Committee members visited the LAC+USC medical hub to see procedures there.
- Chair Sorkin consistently attends Judge Michael Nash’s juvenile obesity committee at the juvenile court, which has just completed a protocol for dependency children that makes sure that a healthy eating and exercise plan is developed for children with a body mass index above a certain point, approaching the topic in a sensitive manner.
- Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton attended a Probation Department meeting with schools, contractors, and the Department of Mental Health, and was assured that the juvenile halls and probation camps follow Federal and state guidelines regarding nutrition and exercise. Probation camps now have medical personnel on-site around the clock to administer psychotropic medications (often associated with obesity as a side effect), rather than relying on Probation staff for that task.

Food preparation is contracted in the juvenile halls, while camp cooks are Probation employees. In some camps, youth learn to cook and are certified for some food preparation work, cementing the connection between food preparation and well-being. Meal guidelines follow generally accepted nutritional requirements, and the Probation Department has its own nutritionist who monitors quality. Both the Department of Health Services and the Fire Department inspect camp kitchens regularly. Committee members plan a tour of the kitchens at a juvenile hall and camp facility soon.

- Chair Sorkin attended a National Childhood Obesity conference in San Francisco, and a document about that event is available to Commissioners. Most contracts for food services incorporate nutritional guidelines published in 1999, and she hopes that the committee can encourage Los Angeles County to use the more up-to-date 2005 guidelines in future. In addition, although body mass index has been the standard for determining if an individual is overweight or obese, the ratio of waist and hip circumference is also being recognized. If a child’s waist measurement exceeds his or her hip measurement, that seems to be a better indication than BMI of obesity and other potential health problems.

Simply telling a child to go on a diet is seldom sufficient without addressing the psychosocial and emotional aspects of eating, and without helping the child to develop a lifestyle that incorporates the recommended 60 minutes per day of physical activity. In group settings with foster and probation youth, physical activity can often be eliminated as a consequence for negative behavior, and facilities may also reward children with food for positive behavior. Neither of these approaches is recommended, and Chair Sorkin hopes that language to that effect can be incorporated in the group home contracts to be renewed toward the end of this year. Preventing obesity is crucial, and the cost of health problems goes up the longer it remains unaddressed. Nationally, one-third of all children are now obese and one-third will develop diabetes; if trends continue, the current generation will be the first not to outlive its parents.

Of DCFS children, 51 percent are placed with relatives, and Vice Chair Savelle asked about strategies being considered to involve them and foster parents in healthy eating, especially since inexpensive foods are often calorie-rich and nutritionally poor. Nutritionist Monica Hall currently offers trainings, and committee members would like to see a partnership with the relative care committee to provide those trainings at kinship resources centers. Having youngsters assist with food preparation, cooking, and shopping helps ready them for independent living, and Vice Chair Savelle also suggested encouraging relative caregivers to create a cookbook with inexpensive, nutritious meals from various cultures, perhaps as a fundraising idea. Education is key, since many families do not necessarily have a tradition of healthy eating and physical activity. Further suggestions for the committee included looking at how school districts handle nutrition and physical education, and the concept of community gardens.

#### **CHILD FATALITY COMMITTEE REPORT**

- A recent blanket order allows Commissioners to read cases where fatalities and critical incidents have involved children served by both DCFS and Probation, and Commissioner Friedman reported that the child fatality committee has requested copies of written protocols for these events from both departments. The committee has also asked them and the court where Commissioners may read such cases, how they would like reviews conducted, and if specific training is required. Various commissioners are eligible to read such cases, and Chair Sorkin said she had appointed Commissioners Friedman and Biondi to handle that responsibility.
- In restructuring the review process, the committee has suggested that the DCFS child death review roundtable be convened on an ad hoc basis, around specific cases.
- Risk management division chief Jonathan Byers has changed the format of the incident reports sent to Commissioners so they include more information than before.
- The Board of Supervisors has approved the creation of a new Children's Special Investigations Unit within the Chief Executive Office, and a letter requesting the committee's participation in and assistance to that unit will be presented to the Commission for approval at its next meeting.
- At the end of June, Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton will attend a national conference on the gang shooting epidemic. Through the middle of May, gang shootings in Los Angeles County in 2008 have totaled about 70, considerably more than last year's at the same time. Commissioner Pedersen mentioned a National Public Radio piece she heard comparing Los Angeles gangs with the Italian Mafia in terms of their sophistication and how severe their crimes have become.
- A large number of child deaths are attributable to co-sleeping with caregivers, and the committee also wants to examine that issue.

## **BLUEPRINT COMMITTEE REPORT**

Vice Chair Savelle explained that the ad hoc blueprint committee was formed to develop a systematic process to incorporate into the Commission's structure its 2008–2009 approved areas of focus, identified at the November 2007 retreat. They are:

- Relative care
- Prevention/quality of life
- Child fatalities
- Mentoring
- Collaboration

Committee members include Vice Chair Savelle (chair), Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton, and Commissioner Kleinberg. Chair Sorkin serves as an ex officio member. Attendees at one or more of the committee's three meetings to date have included Ms. Foster and Commissioners Rudnick, Powell, and Friedman.

The five areas of focus are not all-inclusive, Vice Chair Savelle said, and some overlap already exists with the Commission's standing committees—child fatality, relative care, faith-based, and childhood obesity. (The committee that is studying Dr. David Sanders's report to the Board of Supervisors is an ad hoc group.) Blueprint committee members want to ensure that all areas have sufficient Commission involvement, participation, and communication, and that the Commission's structure supports accomplishments in those areas. The committee has discussed:

- How meeting agendas are set (perhaps focusing each on a single issue, with enough fluidity to give immediate attention to pressing matters)
- Meeting minutes that highlight action items and follow-up requests
- Adequate Commission representation on committees and community bodies, along with regular written feedback to make annual report preparation easier

The blueprint committee submitted the following recommendations:

1. Request Commission approval to reconvene the executive committee, whose function is to determine the method, tools, mechanisms, and resources to effectively incorporate the five priorities for the year 2008–2009 into the Commission's structure.
2. Request Commission approval to reconvene the Commission's chairs' committee (whose members are the chairs of standing committees) to ensure that the work of the Commission through its committees is coordinated, collaborative, and follows the direction of the Commission.
3. Assure that each Commissioner is an actively participating member of at least one Commission committee, as called for in the Commission bylaws.
4. Request Commission approval to establish a mechanism for the review of the Commission's mission statement to ensure that it is responsive, realistic, and timely.

The first three recommendations are covered under the Commission's existing policies and procedures, Chair Sorkin said. The executive committee—consisting of the chair, the vice chairs, the past chair, and anyone else the chair appoints—has already been reconvened, and the chairs' committee will be soon. With regard to Recommendation 3, Commissioners are assigned to various committees and other bodies, and steps will be taken to ensure that they are regularly attending. Katie Fesler from County Counsel reminded Commissioners that committee participation must be consistent, since no alternates are permitted under the Brown Act. The Commission's mission statement is included in its annual report, and Vice Chair Savelle suggested that it be reviewed to make sure it is in harmony with where the Commission and the county are as a whole.

**Commissioner Worthy-Clayton moved that the Commission designate its executive committee to review the Commission's mission statement to ensure that it is responsive, realistic, and timely. Commissioner Rudnick seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.**

#### **RISK MANAGEMENT PRESENTATION**

On May 6, DCFS risk management division chief Jonathan Byers announced, the Board of Supervisors created the Children's Special Investigations Unit, which is meant to fill the void left by the departure of the Children's Services Inspector General and the demise a year or so ago of the child welfare services version of the Office of Independent Review. In its start-up phase, the unit will be staffed with one lead attorney, a social work investigator, and a support person; as caseloads build, a second attorney, a second investigator, and another support staff will be added. The attorney and investigator positions will be contract staff, while the support staff will be recruited from within DCFS.

The CSIU will serve as special counsel to the Board, providing an independent legal review of child deaths and serious incidents of child abuse and neglect, with the ultimate goal of improving the county's delivery of services to at-risk children having contact with county departments. The unit will report directly to the Chief Executive Office and Miguel Santana, deputy CEO for the children and families well-being cluster. Its placement within the county's administrative structure positions the unit to look at systems and processes across multiple departments that share cases with DCFS—including Probation, Mental Health, and Public Social Services, as well as Regional Centers and countless community-based agencies—and drive countywide systems reform in child welfare. Mr. Byers hopes that the CSIU will help the county develop a more seamless continuum of services across departments and promote more effective communication and working relationships among the departments concerned with the safety and well-being of the county's most vulnerable children. By design, an initial emphasis will be placed on referring cases to the unit where there is multiple department involvement. Additionally, any Board member, the Chief Executive Office, and the DCFS director may refer a case to the CSIU for investigation when the case implicates major internal or external systems issues, the potential for significant litigation or media involvement, or certain patterns of injury or death (gang-related deaths, SIDS, or co-sleeping, for example). The unit will do no self-referrals.



Mr. Byers has developed a draft memorandum of understanding between the CSIU and the DCFS risk management division that provides a framework for meaningful collaboration between the two (involving conferences at the beginning, middle, and end of an investigation) without encroachment upon CSIU autonomy or independence.

In addition to monitoring critical incidents and child fatalities, the risk management division also bears responsibility for promoting employee health and wellness, ensuring a safe work environment, supporting child welfare system improvements, and ensuring the integrity of the DCFS workforce. Since Mr. Byers' last visit to the Commission, he has built an appeals management section to satisfy the department's obligations with regard to the state's settlement agreement for the Gomez v. Saenz class-action lawsuit. This section has also assumed responsibility for administrative Child Abuse Central Index grievance review hearings, and is going over a sampling of over two decades' worth of index listings (provided by the Department of Justice) to determine whether investigative records support those listings in the CACI database. Where records do not exist, staff will work with the Department of Justice to purge names from that database.

In the division's internal affairs section, Mr. Byers hopes that budget considerations will not prevent the upgrade of investigator items so that the section can be staffed with individuals having an appropriate investigations and child welfare background.

The health and safety section—which is close to being fully staffed—is working to reduce the numbers of DCFS employees on long-term leave, refine and improve the department's return-to-work program, develop an employee wellness program, and update the injury and illness prevention plan. Later this month, trainings are scheduled on Fair Employment and Housing Act and Americans with Disabilities Act compliance and reasonable accommodations. In the next several weeks, efforts will begin to improve the investigation and processing of employee vehicle accident claims, particularly given that the department's mileage permittee driver program is the largest in the country.

Chair Sorkin asked about the state law effective July 1 that makes cell phone use while driving illegal unless done through a hands-free device. Not all staff have department-issued phones, Ms. Ploehn said, but those who do have either a Bluetooth wireless device or wired earpieces. A departmental memo is planned to remind employees of the new law and inform them that without a hands-free device, they may not use phones while driving.

With regard to child deaths and critical incidents, Commissioner Friedman asked what follow-up had been done on the reluctance that some social workers have expressed to knock on neighbors' doors and ask intrusive questions during an investigation. Mr. Byers admitted that the department still sees a lack of collateral contacts in some instances, and that more could be done to reinforce the long-established policy requiring them, of which he said most staff are well aware. Many factors can influence a social worker's actions, including issues of safety—although if the case involves severe allegations, law enforcement is in attendance—and not wanting to fall afoul of confidentiality rules. Vice Chair Worthy-Clayton expressed her concern about not turning social workers into private investigators or police officers, even during fatality investigations.

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Chair Sorkin confirmed with Mr. Byers that his section continues to review non-fatal critical incidents, although he said that ability is limited as staff get used to the new Board reporting processes. Mr. Byers serves on the Inter-Agency Council for Child Abuse and Neglect (ICAN) non-fatal executive operations committee, however, and will be a regular part of that process.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

There was no public comment.

**MEETING ADJOURNED**